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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000185

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SUBJECT: FIJI ELECTION WEEK: CALM, THEN UNCERTAINTY?

REF: A. SUVA 173

1B. SUVA 167 (AND PREVIOUS)

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (B,D)

Summary

11. (C) Voting in Fiji's general election begins Saturday and will run for a week. Most people expect Prime Minister Qarase's SDL and Opposition Leader Chaudhry's FLP to take the bulk of the seats, though minor parties and independents could hold the balance in a close election. With the ethnic-Fijian vote key and with some indications of shaky SDL support, Qarase in recent days has moved to solidify his base, arguing that only a Fijian-led party can assure a stable future. Chaudhry, who senses his ethnic-Indian base is secure, has questioned how much ethnic Fijians actually gained under the present government. The Fiji Police expect a "calm" election week. The Elections Office has told the Fiji military (RFMF) to stay away from the polls, except to vote. It appears Commander Bainimarama will not have his forces visibly present, unless there is an unexpected emergency. In public debates this week, PM Qarase noted his intention to find a "permanent" solution regarding the RFMF's political activism, if the SDL wins the election. An aspect of that solution could relate to a defense "white paper" which has yet to be approved but which reportedly argues for reduced RFMF infantry strength. End Summary.

The stage is set

12. (SBU) Fiji's general election takes place May 6-13. Well over 300 candidates are vying for the 71 seats in Parliament's lower house. Per reftels, most everyone expects PM Qarase's ruling SDL and Opposition Leader Chaudhry's FLP to garner the most seats. Independents and candidates from four other nation-wide parties and several regional parties will play meaningful roles in some seats, per ref B. Such independents and minor parties could also determine who forms the next government, if neither the SDL nor the FLP gains a majority on its own. In the end, the party or coalition which has 36 or more seats will form the government. The governing party or coalition will then propose the new Prime Minister from within its ranks.

Cabinet-sharing question

13. (U) Under Fiji's 1997 Constitution, the new PM must offer ministerial portfolios to all other parties that win 10% (8 or more) parliamentary seats. In 2001 Qarase attempted to evade that requirement, believing that to bring arch-rival Chaudhry and company into Cabinet would be impossibly disruptive; but Fiji's Supreme Court insisted. In the end, Chaudhry's FLP chose to be in opposition rather than take the

minor portfolios Qarase ultimately offered. In a radio talk-back appearance and a formal TV debate on May 2, Qarase and Chaudhry both indicated that this time around they could work together, since the Constitution does indeed require that approach. Qarase added, though, that he wants a constitutional amendment to remove the "unworkable" Cabinet provision.

Qarase's "race card"

¶4. (SBU) With ethnic Fijians constituting a solid 55% or more majority in the population, they hold the electoral wild cards. Thus, Qarase, who per ref B senses that "preference" allocations have made the SDL vulnerable in key "open" seats, has played hard on the theme that, in Fiji's still-young democracy, only an ethnic-Fijian-led party (the SDL) can ensure future stability. He has reminded repeatedly that both times in the past when the FLP won elections (1987 and 2000), coups followed. Another SDL candidate, Tupeni Baba, who in 1999 was Chaudhry's deputy in the FLP, has accented concerns about instability, claiming the military cannot protect Fiji from a coup. Chaudhry has decried such playing of the "race card." He also is arguing that the Qarase government has failed ordinary Fijians, paying out huge sums to ethnic-Fijian elites and cronies for development schemes that have not improved the lives of the common villager. When asked in the TV debate, Chaudhry confirmed that, if the FLP wins, he would accept its nomination for PM.

Indicators of SDL concern

¶5. (C) We have observed that, in Suva at least, Qarase rallies seem heavy with older Fijians, and Chaudhry rallies have attracted a surprising number of younger Fijians. How those observations translate into "open" seat votes remains

SUVA 00000185 002 OF 002

to be seen. Qarase told us after the TV debate that he thinks the SDL will still win enough seats on the first ballot count (see ref B for explanation), but the margin may be thin. Interestingly, we hear that Qarase recently instructed his office staff to begin shredding "confidential" Cabinet documents. We are told the guidance a few weeks ago had been to maintain the documents.

Observers at the ready; Police expect "calm"

¶6. (U) Electoral observers have arrived in force from abroad, including 40 from the EU, 7 from Australia and 7 from New Zealand as part of a Pacific Islands Forum group, and 6 from the Commonwealth. With our own resources, we intend to visit polling booths across Fiji's two big islands and on at least one smaller one. The Fiji Police have dedicated most of their forces to maintain order at some 1000 polling stations over the seven days of voting. Police Commissioner Hughes has assured the public that the atmosphere will be calm.

Military on alert, but asked to stay away

¶7. (C) Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) Commander Bainimarama and his spokesmen have indicated publicly in recent days that all troops are ready if needed to maintain order. They have also reiterated past public statements that, if Chaudhry's FLP should win the election, the RFMF will ensure no (nationalist-Fijian) coup occurs. As with the Police, all leaves have been canceled. The RFMF has called reservists into barracks for the election period and, in recent days, has had troops training against election-trouble scenarios. At least one RFMF soldier died and several others collapsed, apparently due to heatstroke, while training on May 2. The head of Fiji's Elections Office emphasized this week that he makes the call regarding election security measures; he has assigned that task to the Police; and the RFMF is to have no role at the polls, except to vote, since there is no "emergency." We hear that the RFMF plans to

scatter plain-clothes soldiers throughout Fiji to keep an eye on things.

Afterward: Qarase intends permanent RFMF solution

¶8. (SBU) In the TV debate, PM Qarase restated his intention to "permanently" resolve ongoing friction with the RFMF if the SDL wins the election. Qarase hinted his solution would involve dialogue, but he has also mentioned taking the issue of the RFMF's political/security role, or lack of it, to the Supreme Court for a judgment. Some in the media are speculating that a new Qarase government might endorse budget cuts and a "white paper" on defense reform that was produced a couple of years ago without RFMF participation and that advocated a reduction in RFMF infantry strength.

...and then the politicking really begins

¶9. (C) The stage is set for an exercise of democracy, Fiji style. People seem to expect a peaceful week of voting, followed by intense attention to the counting, which could take several days, depending on how many sets of preferences must be calculated to reach a "50 plus 1" winner for each seat. Then Fiji's politics will really get interesting as a government forms, opposition groups coalesce, and the military ponders its options.

DINGER